

UNDERSTANDING ENGLISH-MEDIUM INSTRUCTION IN VIETNAMESE HIGHER EDUCATION: VOICES OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

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Abstract: English as a medium of instruction (EMI), which is the teaching of content subjects in English where most of the population's first language is not English, has seen fast expansion in recent decades because of global trends in higher education internationalization. The entire picture of EMI, which mostly occurs in tertiary education, has also seen exponential growth in Vietnam. The implementation of EMI in Vietnam's higher education sector has received little attention, particularly when it comes to identifying some of the benefits and drawbacks of these EMI programs. Consequently, the goal of this study was to investigate the experiences and viewpoints of both students and lecturers regarding EMI programs in Vietnam. For effective and professional EMI teaching and learning, several pedagogical implications can be drawn and discussed.

Keywords: English as a medium of instruction (EMI), benefits, drawbacks, higher education

1. Introduction

English has become one of the most widely spoken languages in most nations as a result of Internationalization and marketization (Hu & Lei, 2014). It is also being accepted as a media language on a global

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scale. English-medium instruction (EMI) programs have grown accessible and popular in the sphere of education (Hu & Lei, 2014). These programs have attracted great attention in recent years across the world. According to broader issues like economic, social, political, and educational forces (Tsui & Tollefson, 2004), institutional policies that promote outbound student mobility (Altbach & Knight, 2007), international university rankings, and English for research and scholarship, researchers have investigated why EMI becomes more widespread and popular. In Europe, for example, only over 400 higher education institutions offered EMI programs in 2002, however, this figure more than doubled to 817 by 2014 (Wächter & Maiworm, 2008). To keep pace with this movement, EMI is being globalized through the adoption of English as a means of instruction at many institutions (Coleman, 2006; Wächter & Maiworm, 2008). EMI globalization through Asian countries such as Singapore, India, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Japan, China and Korea has likewise been quite remarkable, with hundreds of universities providing EMI programs to equip national human resources with both competency in professional knowledge and proficiency in the English language for global integration (Chang, 2006).

Vietnam, a developing country in Southeast Asia, started adopting English as a subject for schooling in the 1950s (Le, 2007). Since 2008, English has become the most popular foreign language in its educational system and eventually the medium of instruction in some universities (Le, 2007). In 2008, the Vietnamese government officially initiated a national program on foreign language teaching and learning in the educational system from 2008 to 2020 (Vietnam Government, 2008), which is also known as the National Foreign Language Project 2020 (Chi, 2012). Educational institutions are encouraged to develop and implement bilingual programs that aim to strengthen EMI programs in Vietnam (Vietnam Government, 2008). Consequently, since 2008, there has been a significant increase in the establishment of EMI programs, not only in public universities but

also in private institutions, as a response to the evolving demands of technology, globalization, and the job market (Vu & Burns, 2014). However, little has been reported about how EMI is implemented in Vietnam's higher education sector (Tri & Moskovsky, 2019), particularly when it comes to identifying some of the benefits and drawbacks of these EMI programs (Yen & Thong, 2019), comparing students' attitudes in natural sciences (NS) and social sciences (SS) toward EMI as well as amplifying teacher voices in EMI. Therefore, the study aims to investigate the students and the lecturers' perspectives towards the use of EMI at a Vietnamese university. It is expected that the findings of this study will be able to provide English teachers with a comprehensive understanding of EMI programs, including the perceived advantages and disadvantages from the perspectives of lecturers and students. This understanding will enable teachers to develop effective strategies and methods for enhanced collaboration with EMI instructors, facilitating the seamless integration of content and language within the context of tertiary education.

2. Literature review

Definition of EMI and the trend of EMI in Vietnam

English has gained popularity as the primary language of instruction in higher education institutions in Vietnam, with Vietnam's higher education sector undergoing significant developments over the past decade. In order to align with global advancements and integrate Vietnam into the globalized world, EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction) is considered a crucial component of internationalization efforts in Vietnamese universities. It serves as a strategic approach aimed at staying abreast of international trends and fostering Vietnam's integration into the global community. EMI can be described as "the use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English"

(Dearden, 2015). Under the EMI model, students are taught both subject knowledge and English language proficiency simultaneously, enabling them to gain expertise in their chosen fields while developing their English language skills.

In 2008, the Vietnamese government launched the National Foreign Language Project 2020, a comprehensive program aimed at improving foreign language teaching and learning within the country's educational system. The project had a number of interconnected objectives, such as fostering global exchange, increasing revenue, raising the caliber and prestige of educational offerings, and providing Vietnam with a highly skilled, bilingual workforce to support its brisk economic expansion (Hung, 2011). The integration of EMI within the broader framework of the National Foreign Language Project 2020 was a significant step towards achieving the program's objectives. This strategic approach not only equipped students with valuable language skills but also prepared them for future academic and professional pursuits in an increasingly globalized world.

Table 1. EMI program in Vietnamese HE system

Types of EMI programs	Program nature	Degree conferred	Program nomenclatures in Vietnamese HE
Foreign programs	Offshore	Foreign degree	Joint programs
	Franchising	Local degree	Advanced programs
Domestic programs	Locally-developed with reference to foreign programs	Local degree	High quality programs

The types of EMI programs delivered at Vietnamese HEIs, as adapted from Nguyen, Walkinshaw and Pham (2017) in Table 1, can be broadly categorized into foreign and domestic programs. Foreign programs are defined as intellectual cooperation agreements with overseas institutions in terms of academic resources, curricula,

materials, texts, and assessment. There are two subtypes of foreign programs: offshoring and franchising. Offshore programs refer to partnerships between local and offshore institutions, commonly known as Joint Programs. Franchising programs, referred to as Advanced Programs (APs) locally, are modified versions of overseas educational programs delivered under an agreement between a Vietnamese university and its corresponding offshore institutions.

Meanwhile, domestic programs are developed, administered, and delivered by Vietnamese HEIs. These draw on the syllabus, content, materials, and assessment schemes of overseas programs as reference, but are situated with the structure and the objectives of the Ministry of Education and Training's HE curriculum framework. These programs are known as High-Quality Programs (HQPs) which appear to be affordable in comparison with studying abroad.

The Vietnamese Ministry of Education instructed universities to make plans "to use English as a medium in their training programs. Priority should go to sciences, economics, business administration, finance and banking" (MOET, 2008). The objectives of the implementation of these university programs are (1) to boost the development of universities ranked with regional and international standards, (2) to improve the quality of EMI-implemented programs following the comprehensive renovation of Vietnam's tertiary education and (3) to strive for the target that by 2020 some Vietnamese universities will be ranked among the 200 leading universities in the world" (MOET, 2008). The implementation of these programs aims to increase the institutional autonomy of many universities under the neoliberal approaches to HE reforms in Vietnam (Nguyen et al., 2016). Vietnam National University, Hanoi University of Technology, Thai Nguyen University, National University of Economics and Hue University were the first to implement the Advanced Programs (Aps). EMI courses known as Joint Programs (JPS) were also applied in some open universities such as Hanoi Open

University, Dai Nam University and Tri Viet University. Thanks to the participation in these EMI courses, hopefully, Vietnamese students will graduate with more employable skills and a greater ability to thrive in an increasingly interconnected and competitive job market.

Advantages and disadvantages of EMI in Vietnamese higher education

There has been a rapidly growing trend in EMI research in the Vietnamese context due to the integration of HEI in the global educational system (Manh, 2012; Tran & Nguyen, 2018; Vu, 2014). With the increasing popularity of EMI in the Vietnamese HE, many studies have been conducted to explore the implementation of English as the medium of instruction (EMI) for content courses. Regarding the effects of globalization in the expansion of EMI in non-native English speaking (NNES) countries, Dang, Nguyen and Le (2013) conducted individual interviews with a cohort of 20 Vietnamese pre-service teachers, classroom observations and artifacts, such as teaching materials and policy papers. The study revealed that global influences on teaching practices were mediated by several elements, including trends in educational internationalization, social and community pressure and the accessibility of teaching resources. Vu (2014) held 16 semi-structured interviews with lecturers, all of whom taught EMI courses. The study indicated that not only did several Vietnamese content lecturers struggle to use English to clarify and answer questions, but the English skills and learning styles of the students were also potential obstacles for EMI lecturers. The language lecturers revealed that it was difficult to develop students' language skills in the limited time available to prepare them for EMI.

Tran and Nguyen (2018) showed some drawbacks associated with the promotion of EMI. Even though it is recognized that graduates from those programs possess competitive advantages in the labor market, there is still little evidence about the efficacy of English classes provided for Vietnamese students in EMI programs; students

report difficulties in comprehending the disciplinary content delivered in English and staff raise concerns about the lack of professional development necessary to enhance their skills and knowledge in teaching in these EMI programs. Equity and access to these EMI programs are also issues, as EMI is only implemented in selected programs of the university and therefore opportunities are limited to only a small proportion of students. Thus, while such inequity and inequality exist, impacts are fragmented and on a small scale, rather than on the entire student population of the university.

A study conducted by Yen and Thong (2019) among 136 sophomores undertaking high-quality programs of International Business and Information Technology at a university in Vietnam provided useful information on the strengths and weaknesses, particularly where English is still considered as a foreign language in Vietnam. The findings revealed that students pursuing these programs positively thought about the benefits provided by EMI lessons in terms of resource availability, improved English skills and especially future job prospects. However, students involved in the study experienced many disadvantages of comprehending English-written textbooks and course materials, which were mainly caused by their low English competence and vocabulary size.

It is evident that students taking EMI programs thought positively of the benefits of the EMI lessons. However, there are some problems in terms of language, pedagogy and policy issues when applying EMI programs in Vietnam (Nguyen et al., 2017). The English curriculum undertaken by most students enrolling in EMI programs was not a targeted curriculum tailored to the specific requirements of the EMI programs but a truncated version of a broader general English proficiency development program for students, based primarily on a packaged business English textbook series. It was therefore geared toward professional needs rather than academic study, addressing areas such as marketing, organization, leadership, business vocabulary

and discourse strategies (e.g. negotiating), rather than the skills needed to manage the academic study in English. Lecturers found they often did not have enough adequate resources in EMI programs to clarify meaning and enhance comprehension (Manh, 2012; Vu & Burns, 2014; Nguyen et al., 2017).

Furthermore, some EMI academics struggled with their mandate to raise students' English language competence in addition to teaching content (Manh, 2012; Vu & Burns, 2014). English language proficiency is a crucial predictor of students' success in English medium academic study, however, many students in EMI programs struggled with lectures, reading materials, writing assignments, interaction with teachers and in-class multi-party exchanges (Vu & Burns, 2014; Yen & Thong, 2019). Lecturers, therefore, mix between English and Vietnamese in a random way when teaching. These studies are reviewed to stress the tendency to investigate the use of EMI in Vietnam and also to explore whether the present research could provide new insights. Besides, the studies are used to determine whether there is a relation between the previous research and the present research, or there is a significant attitudinal difference among students when EMI is implemented at a Vietnamese higher education institution.

3. Methodology

Research questions

- 1) *What are students and teachers' attitudes towards the use of EMI in the classroom?*
- 2) *What challenges do students face when EMI is used in their courses?*

Research methodology

The study was designed using a mixed-methods approach that would improve the reliability and accuracy of the data by enabling the

triangulation of the methods (Grbich, 2010) was utilized: a survey and individual interviews. The survey was employed to collect quantitative data, providing a comprehensive overview of the research topic. It allowed for efficient data gathering, enabling the accumulation of a substantial amount of information in a relatively short time (Wray & Bloomer, 2013). In addition to the survey, individual interviews were conducted to gather qualitative data. These interviews provided a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences, offering rich insights into the central phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2009). The integration of quantitative and qualitative data through triangulation enhanced the overall validity and credibility of the findings, ensuring a more nuanced understanding of the subject matter.

Research participants

In this study, the research participants consisted of 215 students who completed a questionnaire. Among these participants, 103 students were studying natural sciences (NS) with a focus on Advanced Physics (AP), Chemistry (C), and Math (M), while 112 students were pursuing social sciences (SS) degrees, specifically in Business Administration (BA), Agriculture Economics and Finance (AEF). Additionally, 60 content lecturers were included in the study. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 students and 8 lecturers from Hue University to gather additional insights and perspectives related to the research topic.

Data collection and analysis

Google Forms Questionnaire was used to create the survey, collect and analyze data. The data analysis process consisted of two methodologies, Likert-type and open-ended item analysis. For quantitative analysis, the data obtained from the participants were processed using the statistical software SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) Version 25. The reliability index of the survey was

computed using the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, which is a measure of internal consistency for a set of items (Dörnyei, 2007). This analysis helped assess the reliability and consistency of the survey items.

To ensure a comprehensive analysis, the data from the interviews were triangulated with the data collected from the questionnaire, allowing for a more robust exploration and better addressing of the research questions. The selection of interviewees was primarily based on their responses to the questionnaire, considering the relative emphasis on a specific issue. Individual interviews were conducted to delve into more detailed information and capture a variety of attitudes towards the topic under investigation. Prior to the interviews, participants were briefed about the research purpose and the interview process. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity to create a safe and trusting environment for open and honest expression. To facilitate effective communication, all interviews were conducted in the respondents' native language, Vietnamese, ensuring that participants felt comfortable and could express themselves as clearly as possible (Berg & Lune, 2012).

4. Finding and Discussion

Students' viewpoints on EMI courses

Students expressed positive opinions regarding the advantages of EMI courses, emphasizing language improvement, disciplinary knowledge acquisition, expanded global perspectives, and enhanced learning experiences. These findings underscore the potential benefits of EMI courses for students across different academic disciplines. In response to inquiries about the advantages of EMI courses, students provided the following feedback:

“EMI courses help expand general academic vocabulary in my field and enhance my English language skills.” (Students majoring in M, AP, C, BA, AEF)

“It enables me to communicate well with foreigners and helps me in increasing social connections with people all over the world.” (A student majoring in AEF)

“I find it advantageous to take these EMI courses because I can know how to use specific terminology effectively in the context of my discipline.” (Students majoring in AP, C, BA)

“Courses have built up better confidence in using English, especially communication skills.” (students majoring in M, AP, AEF)

“Provide students with many opportunities for active participation. It also provides more knowledge and opportunities for fair career growth.” (Students majoring in M, C, AEF)

“The course helps me have a better understanding of international economic issues.” (A student majoring in AEF)

“EMI lessons promote curiosity in learning, and also increase my awareness and responsibility for my learning.” (A student majoring in AP)

“Textbooks and materials keep information updated.” (A student majoring in BA, AEF)

“It enables me to access other resources in English supporting my learning.” (Students majoring in M, AP, C)

“Expanding students’ understanding of our changing world.” (A student majoring in AEF)

“Expanding students’ knowledge beyond the study, sciences, policies, and cultures.” (Students majoring in M, BA, C)

“It helps students easily engage in extended conversational exchanges with foreign lecturers about the subject matter.” (Students majoring in M, BA, AEF)

“Improving students’ understanding and solving word problems in arithmetic.” (A student majoring in M)

“EMI classes help me have a deep understanding of some lessons when reading Vietnamese textbooks.” (A student majoring in C)

“Improving my listening and writing skills and making it approachable and enjoyable.” (A student majoring in AEF)

“Teaching strategies that lecturers use have increased students’ learning in both disciplinary content and English ability.” (Students majoring in M, BA)

“EMI courses help students develop critical thinking skills.” (A student majoring in BA)

During the interviews conducted to explore students’ intentions regarding future enrollment in EMI courses, the majority of participants expressed positive attitudes towards EMI. It highlighted the various advantages they associated with it. These benefits included increased opportunities to learn English, the ability to build confidence, the interest generated by studying subject content in English, and the desire to improve English language proficiency. Students also appreciated the support and motivation provided by their lecturers in enhancing their English skills. Additionally, the students expressed the aspiration to secure better future job prospects, acknowledging their lecturers’ enthusiasm and dedication in their teaching methods. The modern learning environment offered by EMI was seen as providing valuable opportunities for students to experience and learn new things. Overall, students recognized that EMI programs would help them not only improve their English language abilities but also prepare them for future employment by equipping them with both English proficiency and disciplinary knowledge.

However, 7% of 215 respondents said that they had no intention of following EMI courses in the future with some reasons as listed below.

“There has been a decline in the quality of education. Additionally, students are facing an increase in tuition fees of EMI programs.” (A student majoring in AEF)

“I have difficulties understanding lectures and achieving good grades due to my poor English, particularly listening skills.”
(Students majoring in M, BA)

“I don’t have a lot of time.” (A student majoring in AP)

“It is too difficult to understand.” (Students majoring in C, AEF)

In addition, according to the interviews, three students showed their hesitation to this question, for instance, a student majoring in M expressed her attitude by saying:

I am not sure if I will continue to take these classes or not, mainly because my English is not proficient enough to understand the content of the subject despite the fact that learning the disciplinary knowledge in English will help me a lot in the future. I think I need to take some extra English classes to improve my English proficiency first and then I will continue my studies in EMI programs.

The findings suggested that a majority of the participants had positive inclination towards continuing their enrollment in EMI courses and recognized the numerous advantages associated with their use. EMI courses could boost their content knowledge in both groups and inspire students’ curiosity in and outside the classroom. More importantly, EMI programs certainly and inevitably led students to improve their English competence as well as helped them to not only expand job opportunities but work on a whole range of employment skills. This is in line with previous research (Lueg, 2015) showing EMI would improve students’ career opportunities. In this study, a few students (7% of 215 respondents in the questionnaire and 3 participants in the interviews) expressed that they would not plan to register in the next EMI courses and were unsure about their decision.

This result revealed that EMI also brought students different challenges in their responses. It might be linguistic difficulties inherent in their language learning history. They came from different educational backgrounds and most of them could not expect to reach the English level B1 (the third level of English in the Common European Framework of Reference before the official start of the EMI or some challenges they experienced when taking EMI classes.

Lecturers' viewpoints on EMI courses

Teachers often have problems with uneven English ability in the classroom, causing confusion in the transmission of teaching content. The findings from the questionnaires and interviews reveal that the predominant group of lecturers teaching EMI classes at the surveyed universities are of Vietnamese nationality. Most of the teachers are experienced and possess proof of their English proficiency in accordance with the requirements of current regulations. However, the lecturers expressed disappointment regarding the uneven English entry requirements for learners in EMI classes/courses, which might cause difficulties in accessing the subject or accessing the teacher's knowledge. Therefore, only 6.67% of the lecturers used 100% of the English language whereas 38.33% of them used from 60% to 90% of English to teach content subjects in EMI classrooms (Figure 1).

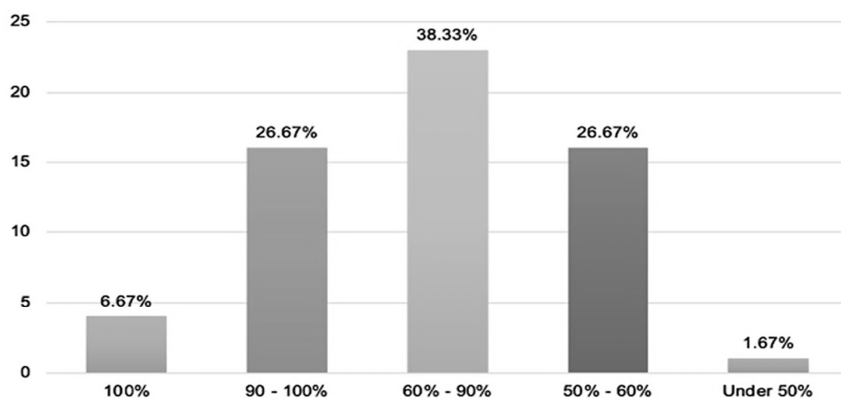


Figure 1: Level of English use of teachers in EMI courses

Challenges students face when EMI is used in their courses

When interviewing students taking EMI courses, it became evident that the use of EMI in educational settings posed challenges in various aspects. One notable difficulty arose in clarifying discipline-specific terminology, which originated from English literature. Consequently, students often struggled to comprehend the course content, thereby hindering their genuine understanding. Moreover, pronunciation issues faced by some EMI lecturers further exacerbated the problem, leading to comprehension difficulties during English-medium lectures. Poor listening skills additionally contributed to the challenges in understanding English-medium lectures. It is noticeable that lack of motivation and the considerable time spent on learning and looking up new words and terms in a dictionary were among the reported concerns. In certain instances, students resorted to skipping parts of lessons when they were unable to translate and understand the meaning. Lastly, students with limited English ability encountered challenges in fully transferring their knowledge from their first language to English during tests or exams. These diverse difficulties shed light on the potential drawbacks associated with the use of EMI in educational contexts.

In response to whether or not students have difficulties in understanding questions when taking tests in Table 2, while 34.3% ($M = 3.05$) of NS participants answered that questions were hard to understand, nearly 50% ($M = 3.33$) of SS students responded they were much more difficult to understand test questions. Additionally, during the interviews, SS students expressed that their difficulties stemmed not only from their English proficiency but also from encountering intricate and subject-specific question types that directly related to their chosen majors. They believed that achieving a higher level of English proficiency is necessary to successfully tackle these tests and exams. Noticeably, about three-fifths of respondents in items 38 and 39 agreed that they could not give answers in greater detail because of their limited English ability but hesitate about choosing

words to express their ideas in English (NS 56.9%, SS 59.2% and NS 55.9%, SS 61.1%, respectively). This is consistent with early studies (Le, 2015; Yen & Thong, 2019), which indicated that a lack of English skills prevented students from voicing their thoughts, thereby hindering them from writing the answers in great detail when they sat a test or an exam.

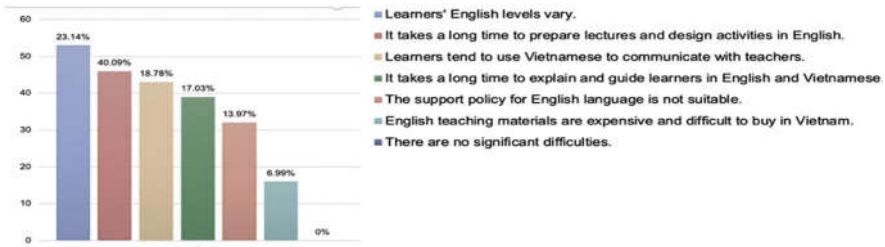
Table 2: Students' difficulties in tests and examinations

Questionnaire items		Strongly disagree/Diagree (%)	Neutral(%)	Strongly agree/Agree (%)	M	SD
I have difficulty in comprehending examination questions that are written in English.	NS	28.4	37.3	34.3	3.05	1.09
	SS	18.5	31.9	49.6	3.33	1.08
I cannot answer examination questions in greater detail due to the lack of English language proficiency.	NS	18.6	24.5	56.9	3.47	0.99
	SS	15.1	25.7	59.2	3.56	0.94
I am hesitant to express my ideas academically because of being unsure of how academic words and terms spelt.	NS	22.5	21.6	55.9	3.41	1.04
	SS	14.1	24.8	61.1	3.59	1.02
If given the opportunity to take exams in Vietnamese, I would do better.	NS	11.7	32.4	55.9	3.57	0.96
	SS	10.7	18.6	70.7	4.00	1.08

It can be concluded that English proficiency plays an important role regarding the exam performance in EMI and has an effect on students' academic results. It appears that most of the students in the survey understood the standards in terms of tests and exams in EMI that they were expected to meet; however, their limited English

proficiency prevented the students from doing themselves justice academically under examination conditions. Therefore, if given the opportunity to take exams in Vietnamese, they would do better.

Figure 2:Content lecturers' challenges in EMI classroom



Accordingly, the difficulties that arose, based on their frequency of mention, included challenges related to vocabulary, specialized words, listening and speaking skills, writing skills, confidence in communication, time spent on research, listening and understanding lectures, grasping English grammar, comprehending the deeper meaning of words in class, and presentation skills. As a result, many lecturers found it hard to use English language only in EMI courses, took a long time to prepare lectures, design activities as well as explain and guide learners in English and Vietnamese (Figure 2).

5. Conclusion & Implications

In general, the majority of NS and SS displayed a high appreciation for the advantages of EMI courses and expressed satisfaction with the qualifications of their EMI lecturers in teaching disciplinary subjects. However, EMI students in this study encountered challenges concerning following lectures, participating in class discussions, understanding textbooks and course materials, as well as their performance in tests and examinations. Despite the fact that most of the lecturers teaching EMI classes at the surveyed universities possessed proof of their English proficiency in accordance with the requirements of current regulations, they often had problems with their students' uneven English ability in the classroom, which

caused confusion in the transmission of teaching content. The result also showed that the use of English for evaluation or Vietnamese did not make a big difference and the most important thing was how to use it most effectively.

It is recommended to create ESP courses that are targeted to the specific needs and expectations of both NS and SS students in order to enhance English competence in academic settings and facilitate the integration of the EMI curriculum. It should be noted that students in NS are expected to possess certain features such as a good memory and competence in problem-solving (Neuman et al., 2002). On the other hand, SS students require proficiency in both oral and written expression, with a focus on pragmatic application. Lecturers should consider these factors when implementing teaching methods and assessment practices in EMI courses, ensuring the effective delivery of disciplinary knowledge.

The design of EMI courses can be facilitated by a learning-centred approach (Konttinen, 2022; Han, 2023). EMI should be brought into the discussion, not just taking lecturers into consideration but also the government, institutions and policymakers who develop policies and programs in a new medium of instruction.

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